

VZCZCXR06529
RR RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHDBU #1409/01 3261054
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 211054Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1208
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0342

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 001409

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV KIRF KISL TI

SUBJECT: WHERE IS THE GOVERNMENT OF TAJIKISTAN'S RELIGIOUS POLICY GOING?

REF: (A) 07 Dushanbe 1531
(B) 08 Dushanbe 887
(C) 07 Dushanbe 1772

¶1. (U) This is a resubmission of 08 Dushanbe 1408 with a subject heading.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: Tajik officials have continued to impose limitations on personal conduct as part of the government's restrictive religious policy. Officials have also continued to crack down on religious groups that they consider to be "threats to national security." At the same time, the government has attempted to portray itself as the protector of Islam. Superficial actions, such as dedicating 2009 to the religious figure Hanafi, have done little to convince Tajiks that their government actually respects religion and rights of religious expression, and imams with no connections to the government appear to be gaining influence. End summary.

CONTROLLING RELIGIOUS LIFE

¶3. (SBU) EmbOffs spoke to some of those who attended the early October meeting of the Council of Ulamo, Tajikistan's supreme religious authority. Most of the imams in the country attended, as did representatives of the Ministry of Culture's Department of Religious Affairs and the law enforcement community. One of the government representatives announced a new set of rules that imams were expected to enforce: members of the Salafi sect are prohibited from praying in mosques in Tajikistan; no one under the age of 18 may attend a mosque during school hours; no new mosques will be registered (no time period was given); and no meals may be served at mosques. He announced that the government would form "commissions" that will inspect the country's mosques and other public facilities.

¶4. (U) In recent weeks, EmbOffs have spotted these commissions - which include representatives from the Presidential Administration, the General Prosecutor's Office, the Council of Ulamo and law enforcement - in Dushanbe, warning people in markets and shops not to wear clothes that have religious significance, and telling business owners that employees should not be allowed to wear hijabs or beards. Istravshan Ministry of Interior officials initially refused to give Domullo Mu'monkhon, the imam of a mosque in Istravshan, a passport until he shaved his beard. Mu'monkhon had been chosen to participate in an Embassy-sponsored exchange program for religious figures; they ultimately relented, but only after a few weeks of wrangling.

¶5. (U) The local media have reported on efforts to enforce unwritten public dress codes. Sabohat Qilichbekova, a Dushanbe shopkeeper, told a reporter for Najot newspaper that one of these commissions visited her store and told her not to sell "modern Islamic-style" clothes. A Radio Liberty correspondent reported that the Council of Ulamo considered "foreign-made" hijabs unsuitable for women, who should instead wear traditional Tajik headscarves; one of the Council's members was quoted as saying, "imported hijabs do not meet Islamic standards...they seem to be too tight."

¶ 6. (SBU) In addition to policing a dress code, Tajik authorities have stepped up their attempts to control, monitor and restrict the activities of the Salafis. In mid-October, the Khatlon prosecutor's office called for the sect to be banned; around the same time, Council of Ulamo representatives publicly called for Salafis to renounce their beliefs or stay away from mosques. On October 17, Amonullo Ne'matzoda, the Head of the Council of Ulamo, announced in a sermon at the Central Mosque that Salafis are not welcome in Tajikistan's mosques, and he called on imams throughout the country to prevent Salafis from praying in their mosques. Ne'matzoda Oto prevent Salafis from praying in their mosques. Ne'matzoda justified his comments by equating the Salafis with Wahhabism; he said the religious differences the Salafis and Wahhabis introduced were some of the main causes of the civil war. He warned that the Salafis threaten to split religious society in two. The Salafis who were in the Central mosque at the time appeared to ignore Ne'matzoda; they simply remained in the mosque and continued to pray. After the service, Ne'matzoda spoke to the Salafis in private.

¶ 7. (U) The increased attention on the Salafis comes shortly after government officials took action against the Jehovah's Witnesses. In late September, a military court ruled against the group, who were challenging a government ban on their activities (reftel A). During monitoring of the trial, EmbOffs noted that the testimony of representatives of the Customs Service, Committee on National Security, and Ministry of Culture were remarkably similar, as if they had been coached about what to say. The Committee on National Security representative said that "sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses threaten the country's national security"; the Ministry of Culture's lawyer said that the Jehovah's Witnesses needed to be "mindful of the interests of the nation"; and Adolat Jalolova, the

DUSHANBE 00001409 002 OF 003

principle of a local high school said she "hates this sect because they can split our nation and break our families apart." During a break in the proceedings, Saidbek Mahmadulloev, from the Ministry of Culture, told EmbOff that after finishing the Jehovah's Witnesses case, they would start a campaign against the Salafis.

¶ 8. (SBU) The government continues to monitor NGOs that it suspects of surreptitiously conducting religious activities. A Dushanbe court has indefinitely suspended the activities of ORA International, a non-denominational Christian relief and development organization based in Germany, and the authorities deported the NGO's U.S. citizen director in October. Official documents cite violations of NGO registration provisions as the reason for government action, and ORA employees have denied involvement in religious activities.

¶ 9. (SBU) Government officials also continue to interfere with the property rights of religious organizations. Earlier in the year, the authorities demolished Tajikistan's only synagogue (reftel B). The City of Dushanbe has now manipulated the court system to deprive the Grace Sun Min Church, of property that it lawfully purchased almost a decade ago. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has contacted the Church to inform its U.S. citizen pastor that his visa may not be renewed. The Grace Sun Min case appears to involve a primarily financial - as opposed to anti-religious - motive, but it demonstrates that religious organizations are especially vulnerable to the whims of local officials. Repeated attempts by the Embassy to advocate on behalf of the Church have fallen on deaf ears.

GOVERNMENT CREDIBILITY: A BALANCING ACT

¶ 10. (U) The government has attempted to portray itself as the protector of Islam in Tajikistan, but many see these attempts as superficial. While the government posits the Council of Ulamo as the country's independent religious authority, many view it as beholden to the government. The local media have published the comments of Abdullo Rahnamo, an expert on religion at the Center for

Strategic Research, a government think tank, that the Council has "always been close to the government and supported government policies."

¶11. (SBU) In September, President Rahmon proclaimed that 2009 would be the year of Abu Hanifa an-Nu'man, the founder of the Hanafi school of thought. Observers interpreted the move as an attempt to appease religious figures who were skeptical of the government's religious policy. However, it appears as though the government intends to celebrate Imam Hanafi in a secular way. Abdughaffor Kamolov, a radio journalist, told EmbOff that the Chairman of the Committee on TV and Radio has ordered media outlets to produce programs about Hanafi, but that the programs should stress his Central Asian origins (while he was born in Iraq, his father came from Kabul), not his religious contributions; journalists should not interview religious figures whose beards or clothes emphasize a religious identity.

¶12. (SBU) Corrupt officials have alienated many in the religious community, further challenging the government's credibility in implementing its religious policy. In August, Murodullo Davlatov was replaced as the head of the Department of Religious Affairs. Davlatov was known as a corrupt administrator who alienated religious figures; he came under particular scrutiny following allegations of corruption in the 2007 Hajj (reftel C). According to a retired imam who had served on the Council of Ulamo, Ne'matulloh Amonzoda was pressured into removing his nephew, Saymuddin, as the QAmonzoda was pressured into removing his nephew, Saymuddin, as the Council of Ulamo's Head of International Relations, for misappropriating Council of Ulamo materials. Saymuddin reportedly had used proceeds from selling donated good to build a luxurious house.

WHO DO PEOPLE REALLY LISTEN TO?

¶13. (SBU) As public skepticism about the government's role in religious affairs continues, imams with no apparent government connections appear to be coming more influential. EmbOffs have visited mosques throughout the country, met with members of the religious community, and spoke to producers who distribute religious DVDs and CDs. Three imams who appear to be particularly popular are Nuriddin Turajonzoda (also known as Eshoni Nuriddin), the imam khatib of the Friday praying mosque in the village of Turkobod (in Vahdat); Mirzo Ibronov (also known as Hoji Mirzo), the imam-khatib of the Friday praying mosque in Kulob; Rahim Nazarov (also known as Mullo Abdurahim), the imam-khatib of the Qazogon mosque in Dushanbe.

¶14. (SBU) Turajonzoda is 56 years old and comes from a prominent family (one of his brothers is a former Deputy Prime Minister and a

DUSHANBE 00001409 003 OF 003

current senator); Ibronov and Nazarov are in their mid-40s. Each of these imams attracts thousands of people to their mosques, and all include criticisms of the government in their sermons. Tajik newspapers regularly turn to them for commentary on religious issues, particularly during religious holidays. CDs and DVDs of their sermons are available throughout the country. Many young Tajiks are sending each other video messages of Turajonzoda saying, "Taking off our sisters' and daughters' hijabs is like taking off the President's daughter's underwear." Ibronov and Nazarov in particular have attracted a large number of young people to their mosques by modernizing their messages. Ibronov has a wide following in Russia as well; he often travels there to meet with religious officials.

¶15. (SBU) Comment: The government continues to try to sell the idea that it is the protector of Islam in Tajikistan, but it lacks credibility when continuing to reduce religious space. The popularity of imams such as Turajonzoda, Ibronov, and Nazarov suggests that as the government squeezes, religious sentiment is shifting toward those seen as independent from the government. It remains to be seen how far the government will go in restricting personal conduct as it continues to try to control religious life. As one local publication commented, efforts to ban the hijab have not reduced women's desire to wear the hijab, but instead have

strengthened its appeal. Pressure on the Salafis likewise might only increase the group's popularity. The poor treatment afforded religious groups, from the Grace Sun Min Church property rights case to the ban on new mosques, attracts the critical attention of religious freedom defenders abroad and complicates Tajikistan's relations with Islamic and other countries. End Comment.

JACOBSON